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Stereotypes and Trauma: Germany in John Hawkes's *The Cannibal* and Walter Abish's *How German Is It*

Theophilus Savvas

1 Germany has had a strong showing in post-World War II American fiction. As Waldemar Zacharasiewicz notes in his survey, *Images of Germany in American Literature*, American writers have found an "almost inexhaustible source of material" in the era of Nazism, and the New Germany that followed (141). Many of these writers, as Zacharasiewicz notes, remained wedded to a sceptical view of Germany in the post-war era, even after it had become tied, economically and culturally, with the US. Artistic representations of Germany in the US betrayed their creators' suspicions of "a continuity of ideological rubble and racist tendencies lying dormant under the surface of the country of the 'economic miracle'" so that "for decades after World War II more than a few [American] authors permitted prejudices and stereotypes mediated by literature to appear not only in their fiction but also in functional text types" (140-41). The two fictional texts which most insistently invoke the "familiar" Germany in this manner are John Hawkes's *The Cannibal* (1949) and Walter Abish's *How German Is It* (1979). Commenting on the former, Zacharasiewicz writes "by repeating clichés almost to the point of redundancy the author risked encouraging his less sophisticated readers to read it as a confirmation of stereotypes", noting that "a similar problem arose several decades later in connection with Walter Abish's *How German Is It*" (145).[1]

2 Both novels are set in Germany but where *The Cannibal* alternates between 1914 and 1945, the years which book-end the most traumatic period of German history, the narrative of *How German Is It* takes place in the late 1970s, and focuses upon the difficult process of recuperating from the earlier period. The relationship of the texts with Germany is problematic, however, not least because both Hawkes and Abish are sceptical about the claims of fiction to "represent" any putative real world (it is worth noting in this context that both novels are set in fictional German towns, Spitzen-on-the-Dein in the former, and Brumholdstein in the latter).[2] In consequence, both writers adopt an oblique

approach to re-presenting past events. Such an approach is also, I would argue, the result of the traumatic and unconscionable events that constitute the heart of the tales being told. From the Greek for wound, trauma was for Freud an experience or event so devastating that full comprehension would not be "available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor," as Cathy Caruth has put it (4). Both novels in question present nightmarish and repetitive worlds, for, as Lawrence Langer has argued, fiction that touches on the trauma of the Holocaust needs to engage in the "disfiguration" of "empirical reality" in order to provoke "the conscious and deliberate alienation of the reader's sensibilities from the world of the usual and familiar" (2-3). Here I will consider the ways in which *The Cannibal* and *How German Is It* achieve such a "disfiguration" by situating the novels within the context of the traumatic past which is their root and the historiography of that past. In so doing I hope to suggest an alternative way of reading the invocation of cliché and stereotype ("the familiar", to use Abish's terminology) in the two texts.

3 Both novels have a relationship with certain traits of postmodernist narrative. The ironic first-person narration and the implicit critique of historiographical representations of the past in *The Cannibal* point towards what Linda Hutcheon would later identify as the dominant mode of historical representation in postmodernist fiction: "historiographic metafiction". Drawing on Patricia Waugh's definition of "metafiction" -- fiction "which consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh 2) -- Hutcheon coined her term to describe those texts which "paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personage." In historiographical metafiction, then, "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructed is made the grounds for [the] rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (5). But if Hawkes's first novel seems to be moving in the direction of such a mode of writing, it is not quite there yet, for it constitutes a text on the cusp of modernism and postmodernism. Heide Ziegler has noted that at the beginning of Hawkes's "fictional autobiography" stands the "unselfconscious novels, *The Cannibal* and *The Beetle Leg*," arguing that we witness a move towards postmodernism in his later writings (212). A comparison with Abish's text, published in 1979 – and so more firmly of the postmodern age – thus proves instructive. For Ziegler, the postmodernist writer "needs to be autobiographical", and by drawing on Abish's *Double Vision: A Self Portrait* (2004), I highlight the autobiographical impulse in the author's earlier postmodernist novel (207). An Austrian born Jew (though one naturalised as an American citizen in 1960), Abish writes in *Double Vision* that the Anschluß "defamiliarized" his "everyday world" leaving him with both a "fascination with the quotidian", and a latent distrust of Germany, which crystallised in his mind's eye a stereotyped image of the country (25). This approach, informed by biography, though not governed by it, allows me to draw together some of the previous analyses of the text, and to suggest that the novel provides a mechanism by which the author re-invokes the familiar – "undefamiliarising" – as a way of speaking to his own trauma. This provides the lead into a final section which offers some concluding comments on the more general nature of re-presenting trauma, and suggests similarities and differences in these two meditations on "Germany".

Between the Rational and the Absurd: Form and Content in *The Cannibal*

Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight
thing was ever made
Immanuel Kant

4 John Hawkes has commented that "everything I have written comes out of nightmare, out of the nightmare of war, I think" (qtd. in Kuehl 3). Certainly the events we experience in thefiction of John Hawkes often appear dissociative, as if collected, apparently at random, by the febrile workings of the mind during a nightmare. And yet in the same way that much of the imagery of the unconscious mind may be traced in the conscious, so too, can the images which haunt Hawkes's difficult prose. "Despite these vague originations and the dream-like quality of some of these envisioned worlds", Hawkes has commented, "my own writing process involves a constant effort to shape and control my materials as well as an effort to liberate fictional energy (Hawkes, "Interview" 148). A structure produced by this interplay between the conscious and the unconscious mind suggests poetry: "like the poem, the experimental fiction is an exclamation of psychic materials which come to the writer all readily distorted, prefigured in that nightly inner schism between the rational and the absurd", Hawkes has written (Hawkes, "Notes on the Wild Goose Chase" 786). The poetic quality of Hawkes's writing has often been noted: his early fiction was frequently associated with T.S. Eliot, and *The Cannibal*, filled with fragmented images of dissolution and despair, and set in a town nicknamed "Das Grab" (The Grave), may be legitimately considered a post-World War II Germanic "Waste Land." However, at the level of form *The Cannibal* is actually illuminated more by a comparison with that other great American poet of the first half of the twentieth century: Wallace Stevens. For Hawkes, as the quotation above suggests, is deeply concerned with the relationship between reality and the imagination which was so often uppermost in Stevens's mind and so evident in his poetry. More specifically, Stevens's concern with the way in which the imagination may order reality (working, for him, through the medium of poetry, the "supreme fiction") is echoed in Hawkes's abiding interest in what Patrick O'Donnell calls "the imaginative process" (preface n.p.).[3] Stevens's poem 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird' is really a series of connected vignettes outlining the differing means by which language may take cognisance of reality, and stanza twelve is nothing but two sentences which must be taken by the reader either as unrelated, or as an example of an illogical inference, based upon a false sense of cause and effect: "The river is moving/The blackbird must be flying" (Stevens, *Collected Poems* 282).[4] Stevens's use of the word "must" seems to link the two sentences in a way which suggests that the latter is the more satisfying interpretation, but here I am more interested in the way in which such paratactic writing deliberately calls the reader into action.

5 In *The Cannibal* such a paratactic method is prevalent. Consider, for instance, the following sentence: "The undertaker had no more fluid for his corpses; the town nurse grew old and fat on no food at all" (9), which, indeed, might almost have been written by Stevens, and which, as Thomas W. Armstrong puts it, is "at once obvious and yet shockingly ambiguous". The difficulty of such a sentence is highlighted by Armstrong who wonders what function the semi-colon has, querying, "does it express a simple series of two details, each certainly relevant to this world? Or is there suggested some kind of

subordination, some horrible relation of result or causality?" (832). One supposes that the "obvious" connection here is that the absence of the undertaker's fluid, that which preserves the dead, figures as the structural equivalent to the missing food which performs the same function for the living. What makes it also "ambiguous", and one might say all the more grotesque, is the fact that Hawkes holds back, from the first clause, the counterpoint to the nurse getting fat, in the second. A similar example is the following couplet: "A swallow dipped suddenly down into the center of traffic, and up again, successful. It was then that the headache began" (71). This is an example of how two seemingly unrelated observations of reality may be brought into relation by the workings of the character's mind; an event which would usually be instantly forgotten due to its quotidian nature (the flight of a bird) becomes significant in itself (for the character, and so for the reader) because it serves as a chronological marker of a point in time when something of true significance occurs (and which we know will be significant because of Hawkes's use of the definite article – "*the* headache").

6 Crucially this technique is not, as Armstrong also notes, limited to such small "units of language" as sentences (832), but goes much deeper into the very paragraphing of the novel:

> Jutta yawned, carried the damp blouse into the next room, and opening the rear window, hung it from a short piece of wire dangling from a rusty hook. For a moment she smelled the sour night air, heard the lapping of water, and then returned to the still warm bed to wait the morning.
>
> The limping English ghosts made their way back to the tank and stood silently waiting for the light when they would have to climb again through the hatch and sit out the day in the inferno of the blackened Churchill.
>
> The Duke, breathing heavily, slowly extended his arm, and as the boy moved, clamped the diamond ringed fingers over the light shoulder and breathed easier. Footsteps sounded in the upper part of the clay-smelling theater and the projector began to grind and hum, then stilled again.
>
> Very cold, the Mayor crawled out of bed, went to his closet and taking an armful of coats and formal trousers, heaped them on the bed. But it was still cold.
>
> Madame Snow lit the candle again and saw that the quilted man was sleeping (159).

7 This example of paratactic paragraphing suggests a kind of synchronic overview of what is occurring at the same time as the most significant event of the book – the murder of the Allied overseer Leevey. That is, as with the darting of the swallow in the sentence quoted above, these mundane events are imbued with a kind of vicarious significance since they are chronologically coterminous with an important event. Armstrong makes the point that "the fragmented plots of *The Cannibal* are familiar to its readers, but almost any given passages may fall into relation over time" (832). While this is right, one might suggest that at a general level these passages are already in relation, simply by being in Hawkes's book; this establishes a relationship of significance in the reader's mind, even if the reader still has to struggle to find meaning in the relationship, and even if the author himself has candidly admitted, speaking of the images in his fiction, that: "it is perfectly true that I don't know what they mean, but I feel and know that they have meaning" (qtd. in Greiner 9).

8 More importantly, such a technique is linked to how the content of the book – that is, the past – is presented. The novel is composed in discrete sections: "Part One: 1945"; "Part Two: 1914" and "Part Three: 1945", allowing the different ontologies of Germany "to rest side by side", as Donald Greiner has suggested (5). The relationship between these zones of the past is not one of diachronic development – and so not historical narrative – but

distorted reflection. Here the meaning of "related or corresponding event, recurring image and recurring action," as the author himself puts it, is only generated by, and through, the relationship with the other Germany (Hawkes, "Interview" 149). This non-linear representation of the past harmonises with the paratactic form of the book, but it also serves to reinforce the novel's "indictment" of the "romantic nationalism" of German thinking of the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Reutlinger 33).

9 Writers such as Heinrich von Treitschke believed that German *Kultur* was different from, and superior to, western *Zivilisation*, since Germany had her own "special way" (Blackbourn and Eley 3).[5] After German unification in 1871 there was a "widespread tendency, especially among academic and professional *Bildungsbürgertum* [middle-class intellectuals], to exalt the particular German combination of political, economic, military and educational institutions: monarchy and industrial success, university and army" (*ibid* .). German *Kultur*, it was argued, was based on "spiritual" rather than merely "materialist" values, and was hence less sullied by the arid rationalism which had besieged the West. In *The Cannibal* this notion of a deep-seated mythic *Kultur* is embodied in the character of Stella Snow, who is figured as "Queen mother" to Germany (131). Stella, we are told, has "swept through ironclad centuries", and has "history running thickly through her veins" (13, 43). She knows that "Nordic women" such as herself are "straight, blonde, strong and unsupple" and that "for five generations the men [of her family] had been tall, handsome, discreet and honourable soldiers, all looking exactly alike as brother eagles" (41, 68). Further back, through history into the realm of prehistory and myth, Stella's "ancestors had run berserk, cloaked themselves in animal skins, carved valorous battles on their shields" (43). A singer, who "boom[s] the words in an unnatural voice", Stella's moral ambiguity and mythic association renders her both Wagnerian Rhinemaiden, and Valkyrie, since she wants to lead her future husband to "Valhalla" (50). Stella links the present with the past, and history with myth, and so does her nationalistic father, a veteran of the Franco-Prussian War. In one particularly revealing episode, in the 1914 section of the book, Herr Snow, stands on his balcony in full military regalia, and, in his elderly and apparently confused state, shouts "victory" to the gathered crowd (70). He is referring to the earlier war in which he had been a participant and which had cemented German unification, but the episode seems also to foreshadow the Nuremburg Rallies, and so serves to crystallise the past, present and future in one symbolic utterance. That this cry elicits "screams of appreciation" from the people listening intimates the way in which the outbreak of World War I actually provided a fillip for those who believed in the "special way", giving rise to the so-called "ideas of 1914", and the belief that here finally was a means by which the Germanic "*Kultur* of sense" (Hawkes, *The Cannibal* 58) could victor over the Western "ideas of 1789".[6]

10 The strongest proponent of such views in *The Cannibal* is Zizendorf. As the omniscient narrator of the book he is the means by which such ideas are insidiously encrypted in the text. Editor of the town's newspaper, "The Crooked Zeitung", Zizendorf is an unrepentant nationalist of the most aggressive sort.[7] Commenting early on in the first section (set in 1945) that "thirty years is not enough time to measure the complete crystallization of a nation, though partially lost; to measure the greatest advance of communal men, though partially destroyed", Zizendorf stresses the desire to understand German history in a continuous sweep, the *longue durée* (25). The response of his lover, Jutta, when questioned on the nature of the Allied troops by her young daughter, clarifies Zizendorf's statement: "they were bad people, but they didn't stay long. . . . You shouldn't even think about

them", she says (26). Bringing defeat, "unGerman" democracy through the Weimar Republic, and defeat again, the period between 1914 and 1945 was an aberrant interregnum in the course of history, and so should be forgotten, argue Zizendorf and Jutta. The driving force of the novel, then, is the quest of its narrator to kill the Allied overseer Leevey so that the country can be restored to the *status quo ante bellum* and set again on its supposed natural way.

11 It is instructive to note that Zizendorf's quest for Leevey finds its structural echo in the quest for Jutta's boy which is the mission of an ambiguous character, simply known as "The Duke". The hunts are mirror-images, of each other. Zizendorf's is figured as passive: he engineers a vehicular accident, and so "must wait for the puttering of the motorbike, the saddlebags, the prize", but the Duke's is active, figured as a brutal bloodsport, where the "infernal humanness" of the prey does not prevent it being described as "the fox", and does not prevent the Duke "hacking" off the ears of his quarry "to take as trophy" (180-1). If the Duke's hunt culminates in a literal act of cannibalism (bringing to a head the many references to food and hunger in the text), then Zizendorf's, so the intimation is, produces a symbolic cannibalism. For by setting German history back on its "natural course", Zizendorf makes sure that 1945 swallows up the preceding thirty years. Immediately after Zizendorf issues his "Proclamation of the German Liberation" Stella Snow casts a look at Balamir, an escapee from the lunatic asylum who believes that he is the illegitimate offspring of Wilhelm II, describes him as the "Kaiser's sleeping son", and comments: "they've come for you again" (177).[8] This is what Donald Greiner means when he comments that "history is the greatest cannibal of all" in the novel (74). History which should be a source of nourishment[9] has become devourer; no longer a tool for sustaining cultural memory, then, but a gross mechanism for cultural repression (8).[10]

12 In such a context it is unsurprising that critics have inclined to the opinion that the book figures history as repetition or cycle. O' Donnell, for instance, argues that history in the novel is "cannibalized by the repetitive nightmare of violence that seems eternal, arising out of a dim Teutonic past and pointing toward a future of total annihilation" (25). While I think O' Donnell is partially correct in his reading, we need to be careful to recognise the disjunction between the author *in* the novel, and the author *of* it. Hawkes has explained that he originally wrote the novel in the third person, before going back and revising it, adding in an "I" before each "Zizendorf", to create a first-person narrator.[11] The effect of this is to split the controlling authority of the text. As Lesley Marx notes: "Hawkes, the Providential author playing the role of interviewee, contradicts Zizendorf the fictional narrator playing the prefatorial role of author" (39). The inscription of history in the novel by Zizendorf – who becomes, as Greiner puts it, the "comic historian" of the novel – emphasises inevitability and continuity. For him "the rise of the German people" is inexorable because "the land, the Teutonic land, gives birth of the strongest of races, the Teutonic race" (176). Yet the form of the book undercuts continuity by stressing contiguity, as I have tried to demonstrate. Where Zizendorf seeks to create a dramatic narrative of Germany's "rise, fall, and eventual rise, again", and to emplot the past as epic; Hawkes presents a discontinuous, achronological – "1945", "1914", 1945" – picture of the past, one which disrupts "history" and which, to push my point, invites the reader to draw his/her own links between the sections.

13 Reading the novelin such a way allows us to expand upon Reutlinger's point, cited above, by suggesting that the book functions not only as an "indictment" of that strain of fervent nationalism prevalent in Germany around the turn of the century, but also of the

historical thought contemporaneous to the author. For the German nation's "special way", so celebrated by the nationalists before World War I, had become by the end of World War II, a teleological tool to "explain the rise of the Nazis as due to some peculiarity of the German character" (Wrigley, in Taylor xiii). So AJP Taylor argued in his analysis of the so-called "course of German history" that "it was no more a mistake for the German people to end up with Hitler than it is an accident when a river flows into the sea" (xvii) since "no other people has pursued extermination as a permanent policy from generation to generation for a thousand years" (3).[12] This was "history with a moral for the victors", as Wrigley points out, and as such it was common among historians in Britain and America around the time that Hawkes was writing *The Cannibal*. While it is possible that Hawkes espoused a similar position, it seems to me that the form of the book offers an antidote to the notions of inevitability and destiny which are the premise of both versions of the "special way" thesis (Wrigley, in Taylor lx). If history is cannibalised by Zizendorf, then, it must equally have been cannibalised by those historians of Germany who by invoking the "special way" thesis argued that the horrors of the first half of the twentieth century were a result of the failing of the German psyche, rather than a more general failing of the human.[13] So, where the unspeakable act of cannibalism becomes the symbol of these horrors, a way of representing the unrepresentable, it also suggests what contemporary history/historiography seemed to be doing to itself. Arguing that the book promulgates the notion of history as repetition leads O'Donnell to suggest that *The Cannibal* cannot be concerned with "real history", and to conclude that "the true gravity of the novel" lies in the "realm of psychic fears and anxieties" (38). Yet while such "psychic fears" produce the nightmarish atmosphere of the book the success of *The Cannibal* lies in the way in which such perennial fears are situated within the context of the "real" past. As Hawkes himself points out: there is a "creepy minuet" which "history and the inner psychic history must dance together" (Hawkes qtd. in O' Donnell 33). Where many historians contemporary to Hawkes chose the easier option and stressed Nazism as external and "other" to themselves – simply the result of an alien psyche – Hawkes is concerned with "persuading the reader ... that even he may not be exempt from evil" (Hawkes, "Interview" 146).[14]

14 Hawkes's novel is not quite an example of the "paradigmatic" postmodernist mode of historiographic metafiction; nor is it quite the autobiographical tale that, as we shall see, Walter Abish's constitutes, but it is, like most of Hawkes's work, a "meditation on writing that is discreetly caught within a complex web of metafictional practices", a work concerned with "the more general question of the constitution of a credible reference, that is of a second real, through signs" (Chénetier, *Beyond Suspicion* 81). And this, I would suggest, plays out in the novel's invocation of stereotypes. Stereotypes trouble our relationship with reality – since they are signs of the putatively "already known"; they necessarily, as Ruth Amossy suggests, problematize the notion of accurate representation of reality. They are thus a highly appropriate tool for an author who has averred that "the reality that a writer would discern before he begins to write is of no interest to me. I do not trust those who believe they know what reality is" (Hawkes, "Goose Chase" 786). Amossy writes, "a stereotype actually occurs wherever a cultural model allows itself to become *recurrent* and *frozen*" (690, author's italics). By invoking them Hawkes is utilising the "double operation" of the stereotype, its deconstruction and reconstruction, and so pushing toward the parodic mode of postmodernism, which, as Hutcheon declared, "uses and abuses, installs and then subverts" (18). Postmodernism, with little use of cultural models, or "types", will be concerned with debunking such models by utilising them

ironically; in this way the effect of a postmodernist text might be said to depend upon the reader's "carrying" of the irony, producing a text-reader relationship similar to the one that Amossy suggests exists between the reader and the stereotype (see footnote 1). This relationship with the reader is more explicitly brought to the fore in Abish's postmodernist text.

Reflecting a country's image of itself: *How German Is It*

> I knew then that the war would never be over,
> never, as long as somewhere a wound it had
> inflicted was still bleeding.
> Heinrich Böll

15 In the aftermath of World War II – indeed arguably up until the fall of communism – Germany had a difficult relationship with its national *Kultur*. Misappropriated by the Nazis, and by historians seeking to find a convenient and self-distancing explanation for the atrocities of World War II and the Holocaust, as we have seen, *Kultur* was regarded with suspicion. In this light, when the narrator of *How German Is It*, a fictionalised version of Germany in the 1970s, informs the reader that the first thing a visitor to the "new Germany" notices is "undoubtedly the cleanliness," it is apparent that this "antiseptic" nature of the new Germany is the result of the ongoing attempts to scour the country clean of its sullied recent past, an airbrushing of history – only a superficial sanitisation (2). Deliberately and controversially the novel invokes stereotypical images and traits: leather pants, punctuality, dependability and thoroughness, for example. Visiting the country after the book's publication Abish found many who considered it an unfair, even offensive, representation of their country; one journalist crassly labelled it "the Jew's revenge" (qtd. in Abish, *Double Vision* 32). This undoubtedly shaped the critical response to the book: much has sounded a defensive note, arguing in one way or another that the "Germany" of Abish's book is not intended to be any mimetic reflection of the real Germany at all. Dieter Saalmann contended that Germany in the novel serves as nothing more than "a fictional frame of reference" since the meaning of the text is to be found in its "linguistic configuration and its apperception by the recipient" (111-112); Paul Wotipka argued that the novel is really a critique of "certain ahistorical tendencies of contemporary culture at large" (516); and Thomas Peyser called for the novel to be seen as an explosion of the idea that any nation can be composed of some kind of "essence" (248). More recent critics such as Martin van Delden, Alex Houen, and Katalin Orbánhave redressed the balance, making greater allowance for the novel's engagement with the real Germany. Both critical emphases have valuable points to make, but it seems to me that the most remarkable element of the book has been rather obscured. The book's narrative is actually produced by the presence of both the abstract and the specific; the text, in fact, represents the site of what the author himself has called the "eternal struggle between a particularism and universality" (Abish, *Double Vision* 35).

16 This is to say that in a common postmodernist gesture *How German Is It* utilises and critiques the invocation of tradition which is one of the most effective ways of imagining a nation.[15] The opening of the novel presents the return from France of Ulrich Hargenau (a successful novelist) as a simultaneous return from "the edge of forgetfulness" (Abish, *How German Is It* 9). Hargenau is one of the many who have come to Germany to "peer into their past",

> to admire Germany's remaining castles, churches, cathedrals . . . . the magnificent Baroque and Gothic architecture, a trip to a few romantic-looking castles along the Rhine, a day or two attending one of a number of Wagner or Beethoven music festivals . . . . the Durers, Cranachs, and the works of Holbein the Younger, Conrad Witz, Martin Schongauer, Lochner, balding, Bruyn, Amberger, and the magnificent Isenheim Altarpiece by Mathias Grunewald at the museum in Colmar (2).

17 Here the nostalgic sense of *Kultur*, which many Germans took particular pride in before the Nazis stands in as a substitute for the past itself. This is intimately related to the rhetorical question that Abish posed in his autobiographical book *Double Vision:* "at what stage in the reconstruction of Germany, at what point in this tremendous effort will the turbulent past fade, enabling the visitor to Germany to once again view the society with that credulous gaze of a nineteenth-century traveler?" (41). Abish noted with ambivalence that many Germans lamented the "widespread tendency to overinterpret everything German though the limited prism of the Hitler years" (183). Although Abish is candid in admitting that his own view of Germany is (too) coloured by the War and the Holocaust, a point I shall return to later on, his novel suggests that whatever the problems with such over-interpretation it may be preferable to the nostalgic interpretation of the pre-Nazi German past. The passage from *How German Is It* quoted above is disingenuous in that it refuses to admit that many of those who "come to peer into their past" will not be motivated by such a romantic conception of the country, but will be returning from an exile enforced upon them by the Nazis. As Abish's text implies, the nostalgic image results from a feeling of loss which is provoked only by a false memory of the past – false, because it leaves out those elements of the past which are deemed undesirable. In this sense, Abish's Germany, which consciously fashions itself "to look the way it was before the war", proves unable to assimilate its recent past into its present, becoming, as was the case in *The Cannibal*, a society marred by repression (Abish, *How German Is It* 127).

18 Repression was certainly prevalent in Germany in the immediate post-War years. During the early Federal Republic history teaching stopped at the Wilhelmine Empire, and Alfred Kazin, the American writer and critic who taught in Cologne in the early 1950s, commented that for his German students, "the war was over. The war was not to be mentioned. Nothing was said by my students about the war" (qtd. in Judt 809). This inability to confront the past critically meant that in the late 1960s and 1970s, Germany was, in fact, visited by the spectre of that past. The 1968 student movements which shook Europe were given an extra sense of potency in Germany by the participants' wielding of Nazism and the Holocaust as symbolic weapons in their demands for a "clear accounting for the past" from the government (Marcuse 421). And yet for all their insistence upon openness about the past the protestors' own invocation of that past was "rooted more in political instrumentalism than in detailed knowledge of these events", according to one historian (Marcuse 428). The students recited the history of the National Socialist period by rote, as if it were ancient history, describing the horrors of the concentration camps in a "disconcertingly sober and detached way" (Marcuse 428). Theodor W. Adorno had made a similar point a few years years earlier, writing: "the working through of the past has to this day been unsuccessful and has degenerated into its own caricature, an empty and cold forgetting" (Adorno, *How Can One Live* 13). Although 1968 marked a watershed in

cultural awareness – it brought to the fore questions over the nature of the country's past, after all – a report of 1970 still found it necessary to conclude that the younger generation's "ahistorical relationship to the past has not changed" (Marcuse 428).

19 It is this problematic relationship with the past that gives rise to the prominent concern with the concept of the "familiar" in Abish's novel. The novel is set in a town named after a fictional philosopher (Brumhold) based on Martin Heidegger, a thinker deeply engaged in considering ways to combat inauthenticity and familiarity. The concept is also the subject of a class discussion led by the schoolteacher, Anna Heller, who asks her befuddled students questions such as: "what is familiar?" and "how long can something remain unfamiliar?" (119). These questions are closely related to the way in which Abish constructs his fictional representation of the most extreme example of the unreflective use of the past in 1970s Germany: the terrorism of the Baader-Meinhof Gang and the 2nd of June Movement. Putatively fighting against what they saw as the persistence of "familiar" Fascist structures in the new Germany, such groups seemed dull to the irony of the fact that their confused sense of the past had actually led them to reproduce fascistic methods.[16] Thinly disguised as the "Einzieh Group" and the "7th of June Liberation Movement" in Abish's novel, these "urban guerrilas" initially target the buildings of Helmuth Hargenau, the architect brother of Ulrich. The "new Germany" is reviled by these groups as nothing but a veiled continuation of pre-war German politics and sensibility; and Helmuth represents the literal and symbolic architect of it.[17] However, their protest soon inclines more towards random and ineffectual acts of violence: "The 7th of June Liberation Group sporadically, every couple of weeks, blows up a bridge or a car just – or so it would appear – to keep in practice" (56). As the bombings become more routine, so their significance is diminished: "despite all their [the 7th of June Liberation Group] activity they have just slipped from the front page, and accordingly slipped from everyone's attention", the narrator informs us (56). The point being made is clarified by Miss Heller's observation that, "when something becomes terribly familiar we stop seeing it" (119). The terrorist groups have become symptom of a society which has rendered the past familiar, frequently invoking it for political reasons, without ever properly confronting or understanding it. This is why in Abish's novel the past seems both ubiquitous and absent, and Germany appears at once familiar with its history, and yet somehow alienated from it.

20 Indeed, one source of the narrative tension in the book is the fact that while there is still "a great demand for old tunes, old marches . . . military bands, anything that will keep the past, the glorious German past, from being effaced forever", there is also a simultaneous fear that this *Kultur* may have helped facilitate the rise of the Third Reich (26). The novel depicts epistemic confusion over whether the "familiar" in Germany should be grasped, as something which may unite the country helping it recover from the trauma of the more recent past, or recoiled from, as a possible source of that trauma. This tension is crystallised by the way in which the country has "come to resemble all other stable, postindustrial, technologically advanced nations" (4). The narrator's laconic concern for the possibly "overwhelming decadent concern with materialism" (5) is an ironic pointer to the pervasive influence of America in West Germany, and the fact that, as one historian puts it, before World War II "educated Germans had long been given to regarding America as a materialist 'unculture' . . . rather than a genuine *Kultur*" (Ermath 16). Since many believed that such *Kultur* had been perverted into pretexts for grave misdeeds under the Nazis, it was perhaps unsurprising that much of the younger generation were

keen to disassociate themselves from it and align themselves with the American way. For these people, as the historian Mark Mazower puts it, "the Amis were seen as . . . a positive force offering a new modern identity to mask the awkward national memories of the recent past" (310). And yet the fear, mainly amongst members of the older generation, that, as a character in Wim Wenders' 1976 film *Kings of the Road* puts it, "the Amis have colonized our unconscious", leads to the narrator of *How German Is It* posing the question: "are there any distinctly German features" in the "new Germany that is emerging"? (3-4). Typical of the ambiguity of the book, and illustrative of my broader point, the question may be taken literally, and yet is also clearly laced with an irony which undercuts the very notion of distinct national characteristics upon which such questions are necessarily premised.

21 If few characters in the novel have a straightforward relationship with the past, it is Franz, the former retainer of the Hargenaus, who best highlights the historical vertigo – that ambivalent desire to push towards and pull away from the past – which so marks the book. Franz is building in his basement a model of the Durst concentration camp. Helmuth Hargenau describes it as "a replica of something that stood where we are now sitting. An architectural replica of something we have effaced" (86). Helmuth is being sarcastic for Brumholdstein's hideous past has recently been disclosed via the accidental uncovering of the Camp's mass graves. Franz's act seems like a rebuke to those who would seek to efface the past for the sake of an easier present. But his response to the proposal that the bodies should be disinterred, "they should have immediately covered it with a ton of cement", complicates such a reading, demonstrating his own equivocal feelings about that the remembrance of that past (163).[18] Franz, we are told, is "one of the few who emerged from the war without any visible scars. Not the slightest scar. Not even a scratch" (73). No physical scar, perhaps, but he carries with him a deep psychic wound: "once in a while, not so often now, Franz would begin to howl, just a plain loud continuous howl" (73). His wife tells us that these attacks are always brought on by "a momentous encounter with the past" (73). Here remembering is a "momentous encounter" which forces the past (self) and the present (self) into a cataclysmic collision in Franz's mind.

22 Although it is never disclosed what Franz's role in the war was, one can assume that his howling is a result of guilt. This guilt catalyses ambivalent impulses – to forget and yet to remember – and it is the latter impulse which marks Franz out as "a real antisocial type" in Brumholdstein (96). He is shunned because this is a society that seems to prefer silence over awkward attempts at recollection. The artists who are revered and who are considered the "hope for the future" are those such as the novelist Bernard Feig who "are not immersed in the past" (82). Feig's work is lauded by the Mayor because "characters in his books are all happily free of that all too familiar obsession with the 1940-45 period of our life" (82).[19] Abish's book suggests that such silence stands in an intimate relationship with the silence that let that terrible past happen in the first place: those who witnessed the trains the trains taking people thin as "scarecrows" to the camp at Durst refused to ask questions such as "where, when, why?" in the belief that it was "best not to pry", comments the narrator (78).[20] Franz's project is deemed "grotesque" and "too awful for words" by the Mayor's wife Vin, and yet the question Abish's novel raises is whether it is the model itself, or the past which it represents, that is "too awful" (95). For Franz, it is the latter: unable to bear the traces of the actual past in the present – the opened graves – he can contemplate the past only by building a symbolic representation of it. This

mediation of the past may be problematic, but so too are more traditional forms of representing the past when dealing with such traumatic events. When the narrator of *How German Is It* ponders personal accounts of suffering, he wonders: "how reliable is this evidence, these articles by former inmates or by writers who specialize in the sensational, in the outrageous. . . . lampshades from human skin, soap produced from human fat. It's too much. It's more than one can bear" (190-191). The ambiguity in the syntax raises similar questions (is it the accounts of the past which are too sensational, or the past itself?), and the passage intimates how crass and inappropriate those questions of reliability and accuracy seem when faced with such documentation. Yet, the discerning viewer of historical evidence must always raise them. It is such difficulties which mean that "Auschwitz as reality and as metonym is the extreme limit case that threatens classification, categories, and comparisons", as LaCapra has written (*Representing the Holocaust* 65). "Auschwitz" as reality and idea seems to threaten the very possibility of representation, artistic or factual. And yet Helmuth's response to Vin's comments on Franz's project – "that's exactly what we need" he says – despite evidently being intended to provoke, gets at the heart of the matter (95). For while LaCapra is correct to say that an event such as the Holocaust may "reduce to silence" – a point which is intimately related to Adorno's famous comments on poetry and culture after the death camps – he is equally correct to suggest that such silence cannot be permitted.[21]

23 What might be needed to contemplate a traumatic past, as both Adorno and LaCapra suggest, is, in psychoanalytical terms, an "acting out" or a "working through" of that past.[22] The former is what Franz's project constitutes; *How German Is It* might be considered in terms of the latter. The novel has provoked such difficulties of interpretation among readers and critics because in emphasising *either* the abstract or the specific, the mediating role of the personal (the author) has been ignored. Understanding the text as a product of Abish's own personal history allows us to suggest the way in which the two, seemingly opposed, tendencies of abstraction and specificity are bridged. Abish is an Austrian born Jew who was "very nearly shipped to the death camps in Poland", and *How German Is It* is at one level the author's working through of his own relationship to that fact, and a quite candid examination of the feelings and prejudices which have resulted from it (Abish, *Double Vision* 54). In *Double Vision* Abish wonders: "was I especially alert to 'Germanic' archetypes. For anything that to my mind would spell out a familiar element?" (42). Whatever the answer to Abish's self-questioning his novel certainly exhibits the same tension of the Germany that it parodies: seeking to defamiliarise the prevalent image of the country, by deconstructing its "essence" (and by extension the whole concept of national essence), the novel (or author) is simultaneously drawn to that "essence". When the narrator suggests that the photographer Rita Tropf-Ulmwhert's images of the country constitute: "an invitation – what else? – to reinterpret Germany. A new Germany", the invitation is immediately undercut by the narrative inscription of the familiar – "certainly not the Germany that was once firmly ensconced (the saddle, after all, is an appropriate metaphor) in the Prussian tradition of honor and obedience, old money and authority, the saber" (129).

24 Nevertheless, it is such tension which enables the book to function as the author intended, allowing it to "elicit a multiple, if indeterminate, response" from its readers (Abish, *Double Vision* 30). The book provokes such a response not only by its content, but, more pertinently, and in a way that links it with *The Cannibal*, via its form. When an interviewer tells Ulrich that "a number of critics have referred to the element of

ambiguity that permeates much of your work. One reads your books, always feeling as if some vital piece of information is being withheld", the reader recognises the metafictional nature of the comment (52). For *How German Is It* does not provide (or seek to provide) any answers about Germany (or even its own plot) but, rather, repeatedly asks questions – indeed, its first and last sentences are questions.[23] This opens the text up, inviting "the reader to bring his or her . . . particular version of Germany, to the text" (Abish, *Double Vision* 30).[24] So, when Ulrich asks of Egon, a character whose "perfection" makes him a reflection of the shallowness which surrounds him, "are you sure you want to unlock this particular riddle?", it is also asked of the reader (181). The riddle is not only that of the plot of the novel, but that of the even more tangled narrative of the past itself. In this sense the novel becomes a provocative invitation for readers to consider their own relationship with history so that they might engage in their own process of "working through".[25]

Concluding remarks

25 The Israeli novelist Aharon Appelfeld suggested that when he began to write in the 1950s fiction about World War II was conspicuous by its absence: "What had been written about World War II had been mainly testimonies and accounts that had been deemed authentic expressions; literature was considered a fabrication" (qtd. in Bigsby 8). In this context it seems instructive to note that one of the first novels published on World War II was a book which looked forward to postmodernism. Postmodernism's scepticism of the ultimate veracity of the historical record disavows the commonsense notion betrayed in Appelfeld's analysis which clings to the modernist notion of "authentic expression". LaCapra's suggestion that "the imagination may prove superfluous, exhausted, or out of place with respect to limit-events; even their allegorical treatment, transformation, or reduction in scale poses difficult, perhaps intractable, problems of tact and judgement" is well-taken, but "imagination" can never be quashed. It is certainly likely to be present in any attempt to speak of trauma, since to speak of the unspeakable requires some kind of "transformation" if silence is to be avoided. As Abish's book suggests, this is true of survivors' accounts just as much as fictional meditations. Indeed, Primo Levi commented that: "while I thought I was writing the authentic story of my camp, just one ... all stories of people who survived concentration camps have no general application. Every survivor is an exception" (qtd. in Bigsby 11). The comments of another survivor extend Levi's point: "I try in my best words to bring the picture out of it. But you see, when I ... I see the picture in front of me; you have to imagine something. So it has a different picture for me than for the one that imagines it" (qtd. in Bigsby 12). All experience is, of course, translated experience, but the more traumatic that experience, the more sensitive that translation must be. The resort to language and its conventions is a kind of translation, a "retreat from the thing itself", as Christopher Bigsby puts it, but it is an ultimately necessary one. So, too, I would argue, is the translation that fiction provides (14).[26]

26 Indeed, neither of the novelists seeks to draw any particular sentimental or emotional response to the horrors which lie at the root of his book. Rather, both writers make the reader work to establish meaning, to bring their own conclusions to the texts, partly because, as Adorno's famous point intimates, in the aftermath of World War II, "meaning" itself seemed an impossible, obsolete, goal. Traumatic events "generate anxiety-ridden uncertainties" and "create disorienting holes in experience", so that resolution is

deferred in both books (LaCapra qtd. in Bigsby 10), and the reader is forced into a position of re-evaluating his or her own position to the traumatic and to the representation of stereotype. Hawkes purported to know nothing about Germany, and Abish had never visited the country, so both are reliant upon images of the country for their fictional deployments of it. But the similarities in the textual content shouldn't mask the differences. Ziegler suggests that "none of his own texts will help the author to overcome his rising sense of personal shame over his historical guilt, unless he manages to regain his narrative innocence again and again through an ever more conscious effort" (212). Hawkes will never achieve authorial or biographical innocence – his American context and the innate depravity of Calvinism would deny him this – but his attempt to, by writing increasingly self-conscious novels, marks his transition to a writer of postmodernist fiction, as Ziegler notes. The personal and literary context for Abish is different. In 1978 Hayden White could legitimately suggest that "one of the distinctive characteristics of contemporary literature is its underlying conviction that the historical consciousness must be obliterated if the writer is to examine with proper seriousness those strata of human experience which is modern art's peculiar purpose to disclose" (31). White's comment was not aimed at the contemporaneous writers of autotelic fiction: the operative word in his statement is *modern*, for his examples are Thomas Mann, James Joyce, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. More content to use "metanarratives" such as myth as their ordering principles, the modernists, with Stephen Daedalus as their exemplum, saw history as a nightmare, from which they wanted to awake. Written in 1949 John Hawkes's novel certainly exudes the modern sensibility of history as nightmare. But history is not the most important factor in *The Cannibal*. As Chénetier writes: "history cannot be considered as the major force to activate men" in the novel, since this Germany is "phantasmal" (144). Abish's text, significantly published in the same year as Jean-François Lyotard's seminal diagnosis of the contemporary situation, *La Condition Postmoderne : Rapport sur le Savoir*, represents the author's attempt to both write-out trauma, and contend with his own personal feelings towards the real Germany in a way that Hawkes has little interest in doing. For Abish, History (personal and social) needs to be woken up to, rather than from. Considering the texts together allows us to discern how no unified and hence "authentic" (or "familiar") representation may be made of trauma, individual or national (which is experienced first at the individual level anyway). But the comparison also helps highlight the fact that fiction, with its focus on subjective *experience* rather than objective *representation*, does have an important role to play in conceptualising and conveying the traumatic experience.

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NOTES

1. As Ruth Amossy suggests, it is in fact the reader who "carries" the stereotype, for it is the reader who "picks out all the constituents of the descriptions which correspond to the pre-existing pattern" (693).

2. Hawkes notoriously commented: "I began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting and theme" (Hawkes, "Interview" 149).

3. In fact, Helen Vendler writes that Stevens' poetry enacts "a mental process" (78).

4. Marc Chénetier has quite rightly pointed out that in the novel Hawkes "breaks with classical generic distinctions between prose and poetry" (Chénetier, 1996, 28).

5. The notion of the German "special way", or *Sonderweg*, as it would be known after World War II has been a key question in twentieth-century historiography of Germany.

6. It was the sociologist Johann Plenge who most famously articulated such thoughts in his book of 1916: *1789 und 1914: Die Symbolischen Jahre in der Geschichte des Politischen Geistes* [*1789 and 1914: The Symbolic Years in the History of the Political Spirit*].

7. "Crooked" is a recurrent word in the text, recalling the comment of the most famous of German philosophers Immanuel Kant, used as an epigraph to this section.

8. Hawkes hence intimates that Zizendorf is really recommitting Germany to the insane asylum which exists "beyond the edges of town" (1).

9. We are told near the beginning of the novel that the Mayor of Spitzen-on-the-Dein is "too blind to tend the chronicles of history and went hungry like the rest with memory obliterated from his doorstep" (8).

10. O' Donnell, in fact, has commented that "it is finally, repression that *The Cannibal* is 'about'" (39-40).

11. Hawkes said: "I simply went through the manuscript and changed the pronouns from third to first person, so that the neo-Nazi Zizendorf became the teller of those absurd and violent events" (Hawkes, "Interview" 150).

12. It should be noted that Taylor's argument wasn't as simplistic as it may here appear; Taylor's assumption of a German "national character" was based on geopolitical reasoning. Other prominent historians such as Lewis Namier, William L. Shirer and George L. Mosse also subscribed in various degrees to the argument that there was a German uniqueness which served to set the country on its disastrous path to Nazism. See Kocka "German History before Hitler."

13. After all, it is not a German who Zizendorf pays final tribute to in his Proclamation of the German Liberation, but the English defector Cromwell who, we are told, "instigated the Germanic Technological Revolution" (177).

14. I am reminded of the point that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari make when they write, "it's too easy to be antifascist on the molar level, and not even see the Fascist inside you . . ." (213).

15. E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975) is, perhaps, the best example of this.

16. The conservative philosopher Jürgen Habermas, in fact, coined the term, "left-wing Fascism", to describe such behaviour (Marcuse 429).

17. Gudrin Esslin of the Baader-Meinhof Gang, for instance, expostulated, "this is the Auschwitz generation and there's no arguing with them" (qtd. in Houen 215).

18. While Abish (and indeed Hawkes) point out the dangers of historical repression, it seems important to acknowledge that there is also, where guilt is associated, an inevitability to forgetting. Individual amnesia sits alongside national amnesia, and to deny its inevitability is to be naive. This is not to condone guilt-inspired forgetting, far from it, but to realise that such forgetting is part of the national narrative of many countries, including Britain (in relation to the horrors of the empire) and America.

19. "Feig", as van Delden points out, means "cowardly" (192).

20. This is an example of what George Steiner labelled the "acrobatics of oblivion" (qtd. in Bigsby, 11).

21. Adorno's most famous pronouncement – "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" – is from a little known source and embedded within a sentence which provides the context of the comment, such that it may be better to cite the more sweeping statement in *Negative Dialectics* that "all culture after Auschwitz, together with the urgent critique of culture, is garbage" (qtd. in Adorno, *How Can One Live* xvi). In fact, what Adorno was really suggesting was the unbridgeable gulf between poetry written before the death camps and that written afterwards. As Rolf Tiedemann suggests in his perceptive introduction to *Can One Live After Auschwitz?: A Philosophical Reader*, "the authentic poet may well discover an apologia for writing poetry in the aesthetics of Adorno" (xvi).Nevertheless, such was the potency of the statement, Adorno would later clarify and soften his approach commenting: "a perennial suffering has just as much right to find expression as a victim of torture has to scream. For this reason it may have been wrong to write that after Auschwitz poetry could no longer be written" (Adorno, *How Can One Live* xvi).

22. On the concepts of "acting-out" and "working-through" see Adorno's essay "The Meaning of Working Through the Past" (in Adorno, *How Can One Live* 3-18), and LaCapra (*Writing History, WritingTrauma* 88, 194).

23. These questions, with their connotations of psychoanalysis, reaffirm the theme of repression, and, as Chénetier notes, locates the text in the confessional mode (*Beyond Suspicion* 151).

24. Zacharasiewicz observes: "That the syntax in the novel is determined by a series of questions gives the reader exceptional freedom in the evaluation of the statements offered" (223 ftnte83).

25. This point touches on the fact that when both books were first published the trauma which lies at the root of them would still have been in the memory of many readers.

26. Considering the testimony of one survivor who asked during an interview to read from her written account, Bigsby notes the propensity for metaphor and other conventions of language: people are "vomited into an impenetrable black night"; screams "knife the air"; torches "lick" the sky (15).

ABSTRACTS

This article examines the representation of Germany in John Hawkes's *The Cannibal* (1949) and Walter Abish's *How German Is It* (1979). The two texts are brought together because the fictional versions of Germany they represent are constructed via a calculated employment of stereotyped images of the country. Here, I reconsider this use of stereotype, and discuss the relationship of the two novels with the traumatic events that constitute the background radiation to them. I draw out similarities in the novels' textual engagement with trauma, stereotype, and narrative

stylistics, but also differences – differences which are, in part, the result of the very different contexts, both literary and historical, in which the texts were written. By drawing on Abish's autobiographical text *Double Vision: a Self Portrait* (2004) I argue that *How German Is It* might be profitably read as a "working through" of the author's own traumatic relationship with his past, which allows me to briefly discuss more generally the role of fiction, memory and trauma.

INDEX

Keywords: Germany, John Hawkes, national stereotypes, postmodernism, trauma, Walter Abish

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